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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
18 August 1985

CIA lacking the means to spy on terror

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WASHINGTON — U.S. intelligence on Middle Eastern terrorists is so poor that the Reagan administration cannot effectively retaliate against them, according to a wide array of experts.

Spying on small, tightly knit cells of Arab-speaking terrorists is hard enough to begin with, they say, but it has been made even harder by the CIA's practice in recent years to de-emphasize human spying in favor of satellites and electronic eavesdropping.

The result, as one intelligence analyst put it, is a U.S. spying system that "can read the numbers on a license plate from 100 miles up, but we don't know what the guy inside that car is thinking, and we don't have somebody in the car pool working for us."

Other handicaps that have affected American ability to respond to terrorism are:

- The deaths of seven top U.S. Middle East intelligence specialists, who were killed in the April 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut as they met with some of their top Lebanese spies, according to CIA sources. Their loss ripped a hole in U.S. ability to find out what is going on in Beirut, where terrorists have killed more than 300 Americans since 1980.
- Tight restrictions imposed by President Reagan on the involvement of U.S. agents and sources with people who commit criminal acts. Experts say these restrictions make it impossible to penetrate terrorist cells, which typically test recruits by requiring them to commit robberies or torture.
- The shying away of some foreign intelligence agencies from unlimited cooperation with the United States because of leaks and media disclosures suggesting that Washington cannot keep secrets.

Foreign intelligence agencies also have proven unreliable. The agencies sometimes serve only their own interests or are deceptive, and they sometimes have used U.S. funds and training for actions contrary to U.S. policy, the CIA sources say.

The overall result is that "in the Middle East in particular, we do not have the intelligence information upon which to base a pre-emptive action or a retaliatory action," said Sen. Jeremiah Denton (R., Ala.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on security and terrorism.

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D., Vt.) concurred, characterizing as "nearly nonexistent" U.S. intelligence on Lebanese and other Middle Eastern terrorists. Leahy is vice chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence.

Several former CIA officials agreed with Denton and Leahy. They added that Middle Eastern terrorists had created networks that have been almost impossible to penetrate.

"The Shiite [groups] are very, very difficult to get into," said Howard T. Bane, chief counter-terrorist specialist at the CIA until his retirement in 1980. "They have known each other for a long time, as friends or at the university. They're not going to accept third-country nationals like the Palestine Liberation Organization did when they ran operations with the Germans of the Red Army Faction.

"Anyone you send in is going to have to be tested," said Bane, now a private consultant in suburban Virginia. "He's going to have to commit a crime to prove himself, and when they send him out to kneecap somebody or rob a bank, he can only have his aunt sick so many times."

Intelligence guidelines

Committing such assaults might be considered forbidden, according to Bane and other former CIA officials, under Executive Order 12333, a set of intelligence guidelines issued by President Jimmy Carter and renewed by Reagan in 1981. It broadly forbids participation by intelligence personnel in illegal activities and states firmly that "no person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination."

"To say that we can't do the dreadful things that terrorists do ignores the fact that terrorists are not Boy Scouts," said George A. Carver Jr., a former deputy director of the CIA and now a senior fellow at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "The effect is to leave us feeling terribly virtuous but without any intelligence on terrorists."

Adding to the difficulty, according to another former CIA official, Robert Chapman, "all Middle Eastern groups are n
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"Instead, [illegible] own targets [illegible] riel in its o [illegible] a former CI [illegible] World spec[illegible] spend $500,000 trying to penetrate the movement, and all we find is one guy named Mohammed and another guy named Abdul."

A big challenge

Because reprisals must, in Carver's view, be carried out within a day or two of an offense against U.S. interests, the intelligence challenge is "horrendous." He and others question whether the terrorists responsible for the offense can ever be identified, isolated and attacked in that time span.

That may explain why, Carver said, "if you go back as far as the 1979 hostage-taking [of Americans in Tehran], we've never really retaliated against anything."

A key reason, the experts say, is that since the 1960s the United States has put most of its intelligence money into satellite spying and electronic eavesdropping. The purpose, several sources explained, was to develop systems that could verify arms control agreements and monitor missile tests and troop movements in the Soviet bloc.

Today, technical intelligence "all but eclipses traditional, human methods of collecting intelligence," said former CIA director Stansfield Turner, a retired Navy admiral. Turner helped make that happen, stressing satellite spying while eliminating 805 CIA positions between 1977 and 1979.

His predecessor, William Colby, also cut back on personnel in favor of technical systems. The result, one source said, was a 40 percent real-dollar cut in the CIA budget in the '70s and a 50 percent reduction in personnel. Espionage officers and regional specialists were among the most heavily hit.

In their place, the CIA under Turner sought to develop generalists as managers: station chiefs and case

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